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ABSTRACT

The nature and function of consciousness-raising (CR) groups for men and women were analyzed. Questionnaires were filled out by 61 individuals representing 10 CR groups. There were no significant differences between sexes in terms of rankings for services rendered by the CR groups, suggesting that consciousness-raising groups for men and women may be more alike than different. Combining sexes, it was found that emotional support was rated significantly higher than socio-political change and behavior change/advice. CR participants appear to be more concerned with the fulfillment of emotional and social needs in their groups and less concerned with behavioral and political change. (Author/PJC)

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A Comparison of Mens' and Womens' Consciousness-Raising Groups

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A Comparison of Mens' and Womens' Consciousness-Raising Groups

A self-help or mutual aid group is a voluntary association of individuals who use the group as a means of dealing with common problems (Durman, 1976). Self-help groups are a popular movement in American society as judged by the number (over a half million groups) and variety of groups currently in existence (Jones, 1977). Such groups provide a form of help-giving which is distinctly different from that provided by professionals (Antze, 1976).

Consciousness-Raising (CR) groups, a special type of self-help, provide women with a supportive climate in order to understand their experiences as women, as well as social conditioning and sexism in contemporary society (Warren, 1976). Regrettably, there has been a dearth of studies directed towards better understanding these omnipresent groups. It is known that CR and other self-help groups generally insist on being either leaderless or using nonprofessional leaders in order to develop a sense of peer control (Gartner & Reissman, 1977). In addition, Lieberman and Bond (1976) found that the two most common reasons for joining CR groups were "interest in women's issues" and "general help-seeking."

In recent years, there has been the development of CR groups for men. Unfortunately, no research has been conducted to either investigate men's CR groups or to compare men's groups with those for women. The aim of the present study was to gather data to probe the nature and function of CR groups for men and women. The two types of groups were compared for demographic composition as well as for services provided.

Method

Subjects

A total of 61 persons (32 men and 29 women) participated in the study

which was based in Chicago. Potential groups were recruited from newspaper advertisements, community directories, personal acquaintances, and coffee-house notices. The men belonged to one of five chapters of a centrally-organized CR group; the women belonged to one of five CR support groups for women sponsored by a YWCA. Each group contained approximately six members.

The mean age of the male participants was 33.8 years (range from 19 to 52 years). The mean age of the female participants was 37.5 years (range from 19 to 73 years). The women were mainly working and middle class; the men were middle to upper middle class. While most of the men were college-educated, the womens' backgrounds ranged from high school graduates to college-educated. Among the men, 47% were single (never married), 25% were married, 6% were separated, 22% were divorced, and none were widowed. Among the women, 17% were single (never married), 58% were married, 4% were separated, 17% were divorced, and 4% were widowed.

Apparatus

Two questionnaires[1] were designed for the study. One questionnaire, completed by a contact person in each group, assessed the group's structure, activities, and membership. The second questionnaire was completed by each group participant. Besides demographic information, participants were asked to rank order the services provided by their group (i.e., socio-political change, social needs, therapy, behavior change/advice, and emotional support). A brief description of each service was provided on the questionnaire. Each service was given a ranking from 1 to 5 (lower numbers indicating more importance). A service perceived as not applicable was designated by the initials N.A. Members also indicated whether they had participated in other group experiences, whether they had made meaningful contacts with other group members outside

of group meetings, and how well the group met their overall needs (on a 10 point scale, higher numbers indicating more satisfaction).

Results

Differences between male and female marital status were assessed by grouping respondents into one of three categories: single, married, or a combined category (separated, divorced, and widowed persons were combined into one category in order to have a sufficient number of subjects in each cell, Courts, 1966). Using a chi-square analysis, there were significant deviations from expected levels (x^2 (2) = 27.5, $p < .01$); three times as many men as women were single (never married), twice as many women as men were married, and an approximately equal number of men and women were separated, divorced, or widowed. Male and female participants did not differ significantly in age.

Sixty-five percent of the men indicated that they had participated in prior group experiences (e.g., self-help group, group therapy, or some form of growth group). Forty-eight percent of the women had participated in past group experiences. Fifty-nine percent of the men indicated that they had made meaningful contacts with group members outside of the meetings. Fifteen percent of the men indicated that their outside contacts were frequent, 41% reported occasional outside contacts, 3% reported rare outside contacts, and 41% reported no outside contacts. Seventy-two percent of the women indicated that they had made meaningful contacts with group members outside of group meetings. Thirty-four percent reported making frequent outside contacts, 31% occasional outside contacts, 7% rare outside contacts, and 28% reported no outside contacts with group members. When members were asked to rate their overall satisfaction with their group, there were no significant differences ($t(58) = -0.57$) between the mean rank for men ($\bar{x} = 6.46$) and

women ($\bar{x}$ = 6.75).

Table 1 presents an analysis of variance using a least squares design to test for differences in rankings between services and sexes.[2] While there were no significant sex differences, there were significant differences in rankings between group services (F (4, 174) = 14.90, $p < .01$). Planned comparisons were used to test for differences between group services. Emotional support was rated significantly higher than socio-political change ($\bar{X}$ = 1.51, $\bar{X}$ = 3.62; t (132) = 5.10, $p < .01$) and significantly higher than behavior change/advice ($\bar{X}$ = 1.51, $\bar{X}$ = 3.14; t (132) = 3.94, $p < .01$). The mean rankings of group services are summarized in Table 2.

Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to conduct a preliminary analysis of the function and composition of support groups for men and women in the Chicago metropolitan area. Male and female participants differed in terms of their background characteristics such as marital status, socio-economic status, and educational levels. These differences most likely reflect the different parts of the city in which the mens' and womens' groups are located and the tendency of group members to invite similar friends to join their groups.

Despite the above-mentioned differences between the male and female participants, some striking similarities emerged. For example, men and women gave similar rankings as to their overall satisfaction with the groups. In addition, there were no significant differences between men and women in the rankings of the group services. Both men and women agreed that the fulfillment of emotional and social needs are important group functions. On

the other hand, members were significantly less interested in more formal structured activities such as behavior change/advice or political action. One explanation for this is that CR groups reflect the changing mood of our society from a concern for political activism in the 1960's to a concern for self-awareness and improved interpersonal relationships in the 1970's. This finding is consistent with the conclusions of Lieberman and Bond (1976) in their survey of 1700 women in consciousness-raising groups. They reported that the four most important experiences mentioned by participants in CR groups were: (1) sharing thoughts and feelings about being a woman (commonalities); (2) being supported, approved of, and valued; (3) learning about one's positive strengths; and (4) learning that one's problems, feelings, and fears are not unique. As in the present study, Lieberman and Bond found that advice giving and role analysis were viewed as relatively unimportant processes. Lieberman and Bond concluded that CR groups might more appropriately be labeled as support groups.

The relative importance of emotional support within CR groups and the relative unimportance of behavior change and social-political change is supported by ancillary findings. First, nearly half of the women and two-thirds of the men indicated that they had participated in previous group experiences such as self-help, group therapy, or a growth group. Fifty-nine percent of the men and seventy-two percent of the women indicated that they have made meaningful contacts with group members whom they saw outside of meetings. This tendency of participants to seek social experiences suggests that emotional and social support are of importance. Secondly, while a total of 25 persons stated that social-political change and behavior change/advice were not applicable services for their group, only two persons listed emotional

or social support as being not applicable.

The results of this survey provide preliminary support for the notion of common factors operating within CR groups. The perceived importance of emotional and social support suggests that CR groups allow participants to share thoughts and experiences which they might not share with others, a notion common to other self-help groups. Despite demographic differences, the similarity in rankings between men and women participants suggests that the needs of the two sexes, as expressed in CR groups, may be more alike than different.

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Footnotes

[1]The first author will send the questionnaires to anyone interested in obtaining a copy.

[2]Participants who indicated that one of five group services was not applicable to their group were not included in the analysis, reducing the total *n* to 35 (22 women and 13 men).

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Table 1

Analysis of Variance for Rankings of Group Services

Source of Variation	df	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F	p
Between Subjects	34	70.4			
Sex (A)	1	1.7	1.7	.85	N.S.
Subjects Within Groups	33	68.7	2.0		
Within Subjects	140	304.0			
Services (B)	4	88.7	22.17	14.78	$p < .01$
A x B	4	10.4	2.6	1.73	N.S.
B x Subject W/in Groups	132	204.9	1.5		
Total	174	374.4			

Table 2

Summary of Variability and Mean Rankings of

Group Services by All Participants

Group Services	Mean	S.D.	Number Indicating Not Applicable (N.A.)[2]
Emotional Support	1.51	0.70	1
Therapy	2.48	1.24	6
Social Support	2.88	1.32	1
Behavior Change/Advice	3.14	1.60	5
Socio-Political Change	3.62	1.54	20